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Materiality of Memory: Firelei Báez & A Path Toward Feminist Visual Rhetorics

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Abstract: This article advances feminist visual rhetorics as a framework for examining how visual art enacts feminist rhetorical invention. Through this lens, Dominican-American artist Firelei Báez emerges as a feminist visual rhetor whose materially layered works intervene in colonial and gendered histories. Centering Báez's 2014 installation, *once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming*, the essay demonstrates how feminist visual rhetorics attends to materiality and memory as generative rhetorical sites. Báez's practice exemplifies how visual rhetors deploy material and citational gestures—layering, reworking, and remaking archives—to challenge dominant histories and imagine decolonial futures. In foregrounding feminist visual rhetorics, this essay expands the field's attention to how power, resistance, and identity are constituted through visual form and material presence.

Keywords: art, feminist memory, material memory, Caribbean diaspora, feminist rhetorics

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My works are propositions,
meant to create alternate pasts and potential futures,
questioning history and culture in order to provide
a space for reassessing the present.
— Firelei Báez

Thus history is not frozen, not merely the past.
It provides an approachable, disruptable ground for engaging
and transforming traditional memory or practice
in the interest of both the present
and the future.
— Cheryl Glenn

It has often been my experience with visual art that the message is found in more than the looking.

It is visceral.

It is textural.

And it is transcendent.

The structure that stood before me at the entry of the 2024 Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) exhibit *Firelei Báez* was no different. A wall with an arch, tilted and textured, as if transported from another time and place, told a new story in the museum room. Titled "once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming", the piece was a physical repre-

sentation of the tearing down/new sense of being by asking the viewer more questions than it answers. First, and most simply, I wondered, *what is this?* The arch on a slant is sculptural, but also textured with layers of paper, paint, and other artifacts, begging the question, *what genre does this inhabit*?

Firelei Báez (1981) is a Dominican Republic-born artist living in New York City, known for elaborate multi-media works on paper and canvas and large-scale sculpture and installations. Báez's work resonates with the echoes of history, weaving together myth and memory, rupture and resilience. In her hands, maps become palimpsests, rewritten with color and pattern, as if insisting that history itself can be undone, re-made, reimagined. A painter, a storyteller, and an archivist of the unseen, Báez weaves together the spectral traces of colonial pasts with the radical possibilities of feminist futures. Her art does not merely depict but speaks—layered, gestural, insistent—refusing the fixed categories of race, gender, and nation.

Báez's tectonic painting draws inspiration from the Sans-Souci Palace in Milot, Haiti—an iconic structure now a UNESCO site, built in the early 1800s for Henri Christophe I, the revolutionary leader and first King of Haiti. The palace, a monument to the triumph of the Haitian Revolution—where self-liberated enslaved people overthrew the French colonial forces—was a precursor to the abolitionist movements that would later unfold in the United States. Báez brings this monument to a museum on American soil in the prosperous port city of Boston, a location once ripe with imports of the sugar trade from the Caribbean. Residing now in a place developed from slave labor, the structure saturated with patina reclaims this revolution and offers an alternative present.

Báez's work extends the painterly surface into the realm of architecture, transforming the viewer's experience of space. Museums—historically colonial and patriarchal places—are therefore recuperated in Báez's hands. Visitors are invited to walk through this new iteration of history, entering her reimagined ruins via the archway, and engaging with the past through a re-visioned lens. By constructing a multi-genred piece, she is merging narratives, while disrupting "standard" approaches to "painting" and "sculpture." The intricate surface patterns of the sculpture draw from West African indigo printing, a tradition carried to the American South by enslaved peoples. Indigo, once a vital product in the early American economy, was an integral textile that became enmeshed with the cultural fabric of early America (Romualdez, 2024). In Báez's reimagining, this material—a symbol of colonial exploitation and cultural resilience—becomes a powerful marker of resistance, heritage, and transformation.

Báez's work exemplifies *feminist visual rhetorics*, demonstrating how art operates as a rhetorical force—one that reclaims memory, disrupts fixed identities, and materializes feminist resistance through layered embodied expression. Her work destabilizes dominant epistemologies by elevating embodied knowledge and memory as feminist modes of knowing. Báez's practice engages intersectional feminist concerns by centering the experiences of women of color, reclaiming diasporic histories and resisting erasure enacted by colonial and patriarchal powers. Feminist rhetorical scholarship on memory, materiality, and identity (Cedillo, 2025; Clary-Lemon, 2022; Enoch & Woods, 2025; Ede, Glenn & Lunsford, 2010; Mattingly, 2010; Ratcliffe, 2010) has expanded the field's understanding of rhetoric beyond the textual, creating an opening for feminist visual rhetorics as a vital subfield. Memory functions as a site of resistance and reclamation, challenging domi-

nant narratives by recovering silenced voices, retracing histories, and foregrounding how identity is shaped through the act of remembering. These areas of inquiry have established that rhetoric is embodied, situated, and enacted through the material traces of lived experience, whether through archival absences, embodied performances, or the objects and images circulating within culture. The concept of identity has been expanded to offer a more nuanced understanding of categories such as race and gender, emphasizing their fluidity. Given this trajectory, the visual offers new ways to engage with how power and identity are mediated through artistic and material forms.

Within this framework, artists are not only producing cultural artifacts but participating in rhetorical action. While figures such as Judy Chicago and the Guerrilla Girls explicitly align their artistic practice with feminist activism, other artists, such as Firelei Báez, provide an opportunity to examine how feminist visual rhetorics function outside of explicitly activist frameworks. Báez's work engages memory, materiality, and identity as rhetorical strategies, making her both an artist and a feminist visual rhetor. By exploring the materiality of her pieces, their self-creational gestures, and their reclamation of diasporic memory, I aim to show how Báez intervenes in the visual lexicon of power, making space for voices long silenced and histories yet to be written—an aim feminist rhetorical scholars have been advancing for well over two decades. To make this argument, I will utilize rhetorical analysis and historiography, with feminist scholarship on memory, materiality, and identity as methodological lenses. Alongside key field examples, I will explore selected works by Báez to demonstrate how fine art offers rich examples of feminist rhetorical practice and why visual rhetorics is a necessary and urgent expansion of the field. Ultimately, I argue that fine artists give back to the field of feminist rhetorics by reflecting on the key principles in theory and action.

Memory: Reinventing Time/Space

Within feminist rhetorical studies, memory functions as a dynamic, embodied, and political act. Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford (2010) reminded us that, in the classical tradition, memory was understood as a vital part of rhetorical invention, "Cicero's vision of memory as a wax tablet, gathering images in place (loci) to be called forth in future acts of creation, links memory not only to storage but to transformation, invention, and adaptation" (p. 116). Feminist rhetoricians have built on this expansive view of memory, reconceiving it as a site where knowledge, power, and identity are negotiated, particularly for those historically silenced. As these scholars have argued, feminist rhetorical studies reject boundaries that isolate rhetoric from lived experience.

Jessica Enoch and Carly S. Woods's (2025) work on feminist commemoration framed memory as active and relational, urging us to interrogate not just who is remembered, but how memory is shaped and what stories become enshrined in public consciousness. They argued that feminist work must reimagine the very conditions of memory's production. In public contexts, memory circulates through commemorations, monuments, and civic performances that simultaneously recover marginalized histories and expose exclusions (Cox, 2020; Blair & Michel, 2007; Crozier-De Rosa & Mackie, 2022). At the same time, memory is spatial, embedded in places, environments, and atmospheres that condition how rhetorical meaning emerges and

how subjects come to inhabit those meanings (Lueck, 2015; Rickert, 2013; Barnett & Boyle, 2016). Carol Mattingly's (2010) metaphors of the "Woman's Temple" (fleeting spaces where women's voices briefly surface) and the "Women's Fountains" (sites where those voices are erased) made clear that public memory is not an impartial record, but a contested terrain shaped by power. Memory, therefore, is both the space where gendered silences accumulate and the site where feminist rhetoricians might intervene, restoring what has been lost and making visible the rhetorical labor of women who shaped public discourse, even when history failed to record their names.

The embodied, recursive relationship between memory and invention — between inhabitation and reinvention — is particularly relevant to the work of Báez. In her architectural painting, Báez reimagines the ruins of Sans-Souci Palace as a living site of memory where past and present collapse into each other. The indigo patterns that cover Báez's sculpture carry their own layered memories, tracing a material genealogy that links West African textile practices to the plantation economies of America, a visual memory of survival encoded into cloth. Báez's work embodies feminist memory's capacity to link the personal and the historical, the embodied and the archival.

In an interview, Firelei Báez recalls, "Art for me was a form or a tool of survival. We moved around a lot and making of objects and things was a way that I could anchor as a little girl…." ("Art 21", 2021). Memory, for Báez, is not only something stored but something made through the crafting of objects that hold personal and cultural significance. Growing up, Báez drew from the Dominican tradition of making paper dolls for her classmates, a practice that became both a way to connect with new communities and a method for leaving traces of herself behind in each new place. Through these small acts of creation, Báez found ways to mark beauty and respite within the transience of constant movement. This relationship between memory and material practice—between what is remembered and what is made—threads throughout Báez's work, where memory emerges as something continuously assembled, layered, and reimagined through materials, bodies, and space.

Báez's work exemplifies how feminist visual rhetorics *practice* memory as an act of re-visioning. Her representative Sans-Souci is ruin and refuge, where visitors can walk through the fragments of history while imagining alternative futures. This echoes the feminist commemorative heuristics outlined by the scholars above, who urged us to ask not only whose stories are told, but how public memorial spaces feel, how they invited us to inhabit memory bodily and emotionally, and how they challenged or reinscribed structures of power. Báez's ruins invite us into a collaborative, relational process of remembrance—one that is at once personal, collective, and political. In Báez's work, we see how feminist visual rhetorics bring this practice into form, reminding us that memory is something we make.

Materiality/Identity

Material feminism represents a shift in feminist theory, inviting us to reimagine identity not solely as a product of language and social constructs, but as something entangled with the material world—the flesh of bodies, the pulse of the environment, the very fabric of lived experience. As Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hek-

man (2008) argued, this approach moves beyond traditional feminist discourse, which often centers language and culture while overlooking the agency of matter itself. In their view, materiality acts as a force that shapes experience and identity, resisting simplistic dualisms. This framework is crucial for understanding how feminist rhetors like Firelei Báez engage materiality as an active participant in self-making and rhetorical expression. Báez embeds identity within historical archives and the material world, showing how gender, race, and identity are not only represented but enacted. As Cheryl Glenn (2008) wrote, "identity determines who may speak, who merits an audience, and ultimately what the results of the speech will be" (p. 25). This underscores how material conditions—what we wear, where we come from, how we move through space—affect how our voices are heard.

The interplay between materiality and rhetorical agency appeared vividly in Mavis Boatemaa Beckson's (2020) essay on ceremonial beads in African culture. These beads were not mere ornamentation but symbols of identity and feminist resistance. In ceremonial contexts, they became tools of empowerment, allowing African women to assert autonomy and engage in cultural negotiation. As Beckson wrote, "for me and many other Ghanaian women, wearing beads represents a grassroots performance that strives to create a space for negotiation" (p. 90). These performances reclaim histories, assert presence, and resist patriarchal norms. A similar logic informs Jennifer Clary-Lemon's (2022) metaphor of the selvedge—the finished edge of fabric—as a site of material memory. The selvedge holds the story of the fabric's creation and transformation. Like identity, it is open to further revision. Objects, such as textiles, act as rhetorical artifacts, communicating who we are and where we've been.

The selvedge, like the beads, offers a way to think about how objects and memories shape identity, suggesting that who we are is not merely an abstract idea but a material process. Or perhaps, as Sewonda Leger (2025) suggested, the material offers a way to "make visible the diverse lived experiences of marginalized women." Leger explained, "Self-definition asserts, I am this person, while self-creation is the ongoing process of bringing elements of self-proclaimed identity to life through action, invention, and visibility" (p. 136). For me, this captures Báez's practice: through layered paper, textiles, paint, and architectural forms, she engages in self-creation. As we saw with the sculptural work that opens this article, by combining cultural materials—indigo printing on top of an arch representing Haitian freedom—she creates a new history, a new narrative for the self as immigrant, as (re)placed, as belonging. Her work resists a fixed identity, embracing *becoming*, a continual unfolding at the intersection of memory, materiality, and imagination.

When asked about her installation "once we have torn shit down…," Báez reflects on the significance of its material presence, saying, "that tilting wall when you first walk in, is to give that space I have in the studio where I can touch all the materials and I can see that as much as these are spaces of illusion, they are objects in space that exist with us, and I wanted it to be a permeable painting" ("Firelei Báez," 2024). For Báez, materiality is an active force in her practice—one that shapes process and meaning. Báez describes herself as "ceding control to the materials," allowing them to guide the unfolding story within the work. This surrender to material agency underscores Báez's investment in the ways materials themselves hold memory, history, and the residue of identity. Through this attentiveness, Báez's work embodies a form of material feminism by

using the material as co-constitutive, actively participating in the making of meaning and identity. Through the process of laying colors, images, and materials representative of Báez's vision of self over commonly colonial and patriarchal images, she replaces the dominant narratives for one more dynamic.

Toward Feminist Visual Culture/Rhetorics

The turn to the visual in feminist rhetorical studies marks not a departure from language but a necessary expansion, one that recognizes visual culture as a contested terrain shaped by gendered, racial, and classed forces. Feminist visual rhetoric and feminist visual culture share a mutual investment in understanding how images shape, circulate, and enact identities. Where feminist visual rhetoric offers the vocabulary and methods for analyzing visual meaning-making, feminist visual culture—particularly fine art—provides the material sites where these rhetorical processes unfold. Together, they reveal how feminist artists engage power and representation through visual means.

Feminist artists have worked within this terrain to resist dominant narratives and subvert stereotypes. Feminist visual rhetoric helps articulate how such resistance functions—how images intervene in and disrupt visual regimes that naturalize oppression, opening space for counter-visualities grounded in embodied knowledge. Scholars such as Efe Plange (2025) and Kristie Fleckenstein (2019) illustrated how instability and multimodality unsettle these regimes. Drawing on Barthes' notion of the image as a "floating chain" of signifieds, Plange showed how Angela Peoples' viral 2017 Women's March photo—Peoples, Black and resolute, holding a sign that reads "Don't forget: white women voted for Trump," as white women in pink hats sip Starbucks—revealed what dominant feminist imagery often conceals. Fleckenstein's study of Frances Benjamin Johnston likewise showed how women have long used multimodal strategies to assert rhetorical authority; Johnston's self-portraits and public lectures made the case for women photographers by performing competence and confidence in image and text.

The interplay between image and viewer underlines the stakes of feminist visual rhetoric, especially in fine art, where audience and intention are mediated by curated spaces such as museums and galleries. Even within these structured environments, viewers bring their own experiences, histories, and positionalities into dialogue with the work. Firelei Báez's practice exemplifies this theoretical intervention. Blending archival fragments, speculative portraiture, and diasporic storytelling, her paintings haunt colonial archives by layering bodies and imagery atop historical documents to assert the presence of women of the Caribbean diaspora while refusing containment. Báez transforms materials of domination into vessels of reclamation, making visible what official records suppress. Her work demonstrates that feminist memory must be visual and embodied, unfolding across time and medium in ways that invite constant reimagining. In this sense, Báez is not only making art, she is enacting a feminist rhetorical practice that unsettles how histories are recorded and how identities are seen.

Something New

"It is always within your grasp to make something new…" — Firelei Báez

Firelei Báez's words encapsulate the spirit of her artistic practice—one that actively reshapes history. Her work embodies the idea that the past is not a fixed inheritance but a material to be worked with, layered, and transformed. This ethos aligns with the instability of meaning in feminist visual rhetorics, where images refuse singular interpretations and instead invite ongoing negotiation. Báez moves within this space of possibility, often layering archival documents with speculative portraiture to craft narratives that resist erasure and assert new ways of seeing. One example, in a series of paintings focused on the history of New Orleans, Báez overlays figures, symbolic imagery, and calligraphic gestures upon the archival architectural surveys from the 1930s-era Historic American Buildings Survey, a project by the Works Progress Administration that documented significant New Orleans landmarks. Reminiscent of the piece from the introduction of this essay, "once we have torn shit down…", the series underlines how New Orleans and the Caribbean were acutely connected through the transatlantic trade networks of sugar and slavery. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Caribbean colonies like Haiti, Cuba, and Jamaica were major producers of sugar, an industry that was entirely reliant on enslaved labor. New Orleans, like Boston, was a key port city and a hub for the trade of enslaved people and a center of sugar refining and distribution. Báez engages with this history, reclaiming the archival materials by painting new imagery over the documents and declaring the power to overwrite the divisive histories they perpetuate.

In her hands, the archive is a dynamic site of reclamation, where myth and memory intertwine to create something entirely new. To fully appreciate Báez's contributions to feminist visual rhetoric, we must examine how her work bridges historical materials and imagined futures, offering a vision of identity as relational and in motion. Báez's painting, "the trace, whether we are attending to it or not (a space for each other's breathing)", demonstrates this archival reclamation, reauthoring a story bound to material and geographical histories. The painting features a *ciguapa*—an elusive female figure from Dominican folklore—her body curving across the architectural blueprint of the Illinois Central Railroad trestle, uniting two sides of the railroad tracks. This act of bridging is more than a redrawing of lines; it unsettles the boundaries the map once imposed, crossing racial and social divisions. As Báez explains, "She is quite literally bridging and forming space for communities to be able to carve out belonging and breathe." In this image, the *ciguapa*—mythical and material—embodies what Sewonda Leger defines as *self-creation*: an ongoing process through which marginalized subjects, particularly women of color, actively shape and perform their identities in real-time. By bending across lines, Báez's *ciguapa* asserts her place in a history that has long sought to erase her while refusing to be bound by it, instead offering a vision of identity as fluid, relational, and capable of crossing time and space.

The *ciguapa*'s "mutable body" is perpetually in transition, making and remaking identity in the face of historical erasure and displacement. Her flexibility—her ability to stretch across the tracks—speaks to the role women, especially women of color, have long played as bridges, uniting families, communities, and his-

tories. This act of bridging is a profound reordering of power. As Báez states, "In most power relationships, you have the victim trying to solve the situation. And I don't want to create narratives of victimhood. I want to flip it" ("New acquisitions reshape past histories," 2022). In "the trace...", Báez inverts these power dynamics, making the *ciguapa* a force of creative agency—her body and its material presence rewriting the histories that sought to constrain her.

In this light, Báez's work draws us back to the material, as we remember the selvedge and the beads, reminding us that identity is never a purely conceptual abstraction. It is woven into the material traces we leave behind, the objects we touch, the bodies we inhabit, and the spaces we move through. Like the selvedge—a boundary that holds fabric together while offering the potential for unraveling—Báez's *ciguapa* embodies the tension between continuity and rupture, between the inherited weight of history and the freedom of creative reinvention. And, like the beads, whose meanings are carried through the hands, stories, and memory, Báez's materials—paints over archival documents— become vessels of diasporic knowledge, collecting fragments of history and reassembling them into new configurations. Through this material language, Báez's "self-creation" is a collective gesture—an insistence that identity, memory, and materiality are forever intertwined, always under revision, and perpetually open to reinvention. Her transcending portraiture carries identity into a realm where it is both anchored in the past and free to break from it, liberated through the interplay of memory, materiality, and imagination.

Like many other paintings in this series, water plays a crucial symbolic role in "the trace." Referencing Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans's fraught history with weather-related devastation, the water in this painting seems to propel the *ciguapa* figure, aiding in her dynamic backbend. This movement evokes Báez's refusal to frame her characters within victimhood, offering instead the possibility of resilience and hope. Báez here aligns with Cheryl Glenn's insistence that hope is a critical rhetorical tool—one that can catalyze collective action and resistance. In this watery gesture, Báez's *ciguapa* becomes a symbol of survival and transformation, a powerful force for reimagining individual and collective futures.

A Closing

In an interview with Báez, she explains, "If I had to describe the work, it would be many two-dimensional and three-dimensional explorations of how to be a human in the world, especially a female figure, a female body, in culture as we are now." This has been exemplified in a body of work that reimagines the past, where history and memory merge through Báez's lens of transformation. Báez's work thus exemplifies the vital trajectory of feminist rhetorical studies, a field that has long championed the rhetorical significance of marginalized voices, embodied practices, and everyday forms of meaning-making. Feminist rhetorical scholars have demonstrated that rhetoric is not confined to speech or text but unfolds through material and visual forms that shape how histories are remembered and identities are performed. Fine artists like Báez, whose work blends archival reclamation, diasporic storytelling, and embodied memory, show how visual rhetoric can intervene in dominant narratives, offering new ways of being and imagining the world. As feminist rhetorical studies continue to expand to fully account for the visual, it reveals how art itself becomes a form of rhetorical action: a practice of memory, a material argument, and a site of individual and collective self-creation.

In recognizing fine artists as feminist visual rhetors, the field broadens its scope and acknowledges the many ways marginalized communities have long relied on visual, material, and embodied practices to assert their presence within and beyond history. In doing so, it creates space for new forms of engagement that challenge the status quo and offer paths for collective self-creation and re-imagination. Through their work, feminist visual rhetoricians provide a model of how art can serve as a form of rhetorical intervention and a tool for change.

Biography

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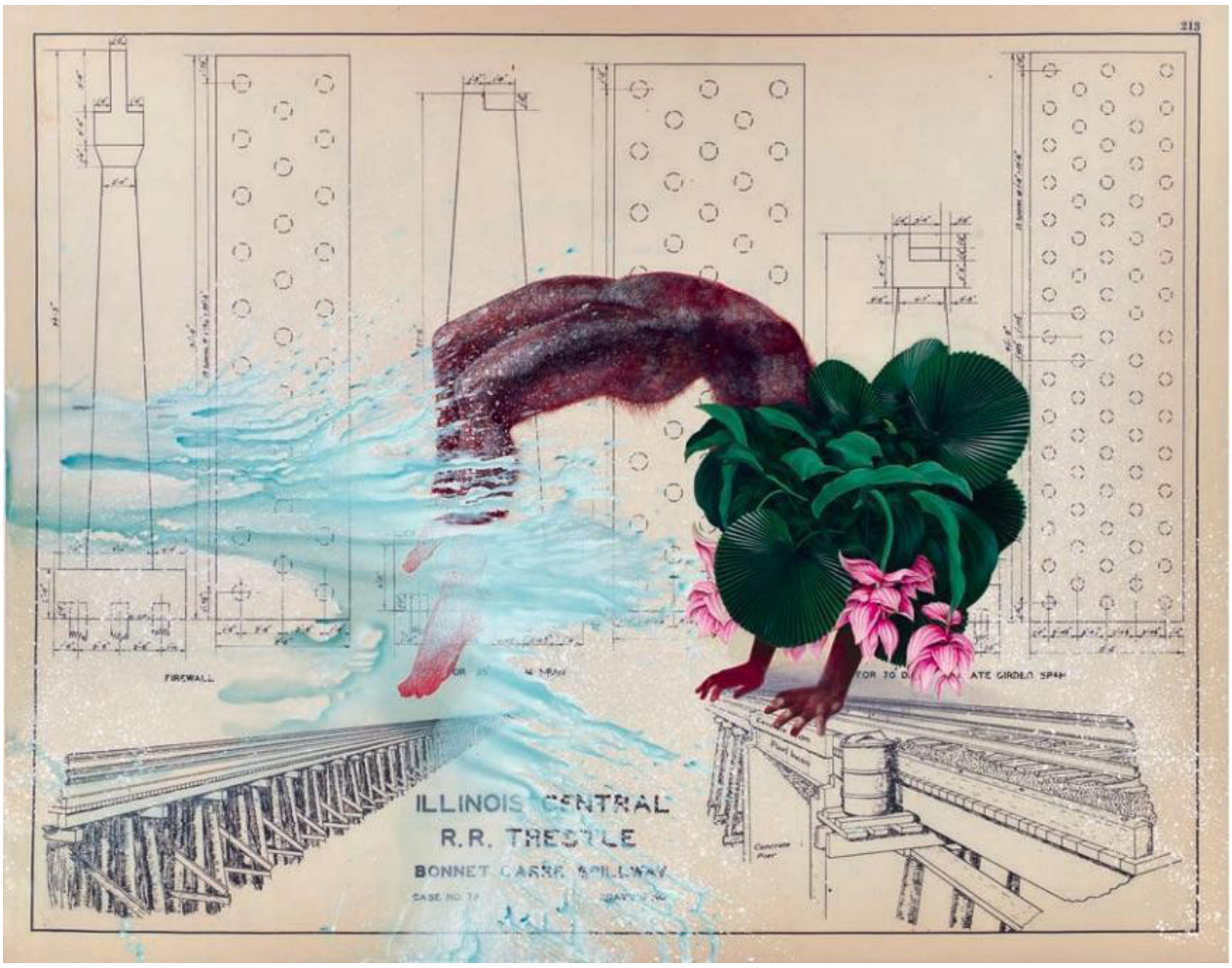
Appendix

Figure 1: *once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming*, (2014). Acrylic, gouache, sheet rock and steel, 168 x 144 inches. Installation view, Firelei Báez, the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston 2024. Photo by Mel Taing.

Figure 2: Firelei Báez, *the trace, whether we are attending to it or not (a space for each other's breathing)*, 2019, Acrylic, oil, and transfer on archival printed canvas, 90 x 114 3/8 inches, Photo by Phoebe d'Heurle.



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